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A pilot study to assess the effects of life coaching with Year 12 students.

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Abstract

A pilot study was conducted to assess the effects of life coaching on Year 12 students' personal and academic development, specifically evaluating emotional well being, problem solving ability, relationships and academic performance. Students were randomly selected from consenting students within pastoral care groups. Two control groups of matched students were then selected from consenting students and from students who elected not to participate in the coaching. Data were collected from all students early in the year, before coaching and at a mid year point. No significant differences on any of the measures were found. Further data collection points will be at the end of twelve months and a follow-up one year after the students have left school.

Life Coaching

The increasing popularity of life coaching can be anecdotally evidenced by the growing number of life coaches advertising their services. Numerous training courses in life coaching have also emerged claiming to impart the knowledge required to become a successful life coach. What life coaching actually is, however, and what its benefits are, remains controversial. Recent research conducted by Grant (2003) has demonstrated that a life coaching program with adults influenced self-reported mental health, quality of life and goal-attainment. Similarly Green, Oades, and Grant (2003) reported that life coaching with adults enhanced their striving for goals, wellbeing and hope.

While these preliminary results appear promising, confusion in the literature concerning definitions of life coaching persist. For example, there are terms such as personal coaching, lifestyle coaching, business coaching, executive coaching, sports coaching, parent coaching, career coaching and relationship coaching. In the public perception, however, coaching is generally identified with sports coaching or executive coaching (Garman, Whiston, & Zlatoper, 2000). When life coaching is applied to school students, the terminology becomes even more blurred. Coaching with students is sometimes called academic coaching, which has been described as neither counselling nor tutoring (Dansinger, 2000).

While life coaching is a relatively new phenomenon, another form of coaching, peer coaching, has had a long history in schools. Peers have been used to teach reading with same-age or cross-age peers, with increases in reading achievement shown for both tutors and those they tutor (Gensemer, 2000). Peers have also coached others with emotional difficulties, such as anger (Besley, 1999), behavioural difficulties (Rasmussen & Lund, 2002) and anxiety (Campbell, 2003) with benefits for both coaches and those they have coached. The peer coaching literature is not simply restricted to students but is used extensively in the context of beginning teachers and has had positive results (Jenkins & Veal, 2002).

We define life coaching in this study as working with a population of normal, non-clinical clients with the emphasis on enhancing personal growth rather than fixing problems. Life coaching is different from teaching but similar to mentoring as it is an ongoing, confidential, one-on-one relationship between coach and student (Witherspoon & White, 1996). It is a change process for the enhancement of individual performance, personal growth and well being. The relationship between the school counsellor, acting in a coaching role, and student is an equal one where the student sets the agenda and the coach provides individual support in times of transition.

Intuitively, there appear to be several immediate benefits to using life coaching with young people and, more particularly with final-year high school students. At points of transition, students consider life changes including study, new challenges and career decisions. As Jones and Frydenberg (2000) found, first year university students' level of academic stress was greater at the beginning of semester, during the transition from school, than at the end of semester prior to the examination period. Life coaching offers a unique opportunity to support senior students with the stresses and demands of their final year in secondary school. In addition, a coaching

program can assist students to maintaining a balanced lifestyle. Further, early intervention can have more long lasting effects throughout their lives. Other benefits could be enhancement of self-esteem, better career choices, and being able to resist peer pressure. A significant amount of time, money and effort is put into educating young people, but upon leaving school, many of these skills and attitudes are not put to best use. Allowing students to reflect on their life, taking into account what is working for them already, and building on existing strengths as well as adding new ones, more adequately prepares them for life after school.

One study which has evaluated the effects of a coaching intervention on the academic and personal development of college students is by Steinwedel and Wilmington (2001). Thirty-six allied health students self-selected to join an experimental group (n=10) who received coaching and two control groups (n=13). The control group A completed pre and post measures while control group B completed only post measures. The results showed improved self-efficacy in the coached students as well as those students reporting that coaching helped them achieve their academic goals.

Although Ponzo (1977) first talked about the counsellor coach in schools, there does not seem to any research studies evaluating coaching with school students. However, in April 2003 the South Dakota School Counselors Association in America hosted a pre-conference session on “Lifecoaching: New opportunities for school counsellors”.

The current study focused on two research questions. First, to investigate if there were any differences between students who elected to participate in life coaching from those who did not. Second, to investigate if individual life coaching enhanced the academic performance, emotional well being and problem solving ability of participants, as well as improving their relationships with others.

Method

Participants

One hundred and four Year 12 students at a Catholic coeducational college in a State capital city in Australia were invited to join a life coaching program for the year run by the school psychologist/counsellor. Seventy-one students (68%) volunteered to participate in the program, but given the resource constraints, it was necessary to restrict the participants to twelve. These students were randomly chosen within the five pastoral care classes with 2 or 3 students from each class being selected. Two other groups were then chosen matched by gender, age and academic achievement within the pastoral care classes. The first control group were selected from students who had volunteered to be included in the program and the second control group were selected from students who did not wish to participate in the life coaching. There were 5 males and 7 females in each of the three groups.

Measures

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The SDQ (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 2003) is a 25-item self-report measure for use with adolescents. Ten items are worded as strengths and 15 as

difficulties. The items are divided into 5 scales of 5 items each: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and prosocial behaviours. The items are scored 0 for “not true”, 1 for “somewhat true” and 2 for “certainly true”. Five items are worded positively and scored in the opposite direction. All except the last scale of prosocial behaviours are added to generate a total difficulties score ranging from 0 to 40.

Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale

This scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a self-report measure which is used to assess self-esteem. Ten items are marked on a 4-point scale, scored as 4 for “strongly agree”, 3 for “agree”, 2 for “disagree” and 1 for “strongly disagree”. There are 5 items that are negatively worded and are scored in reverse. The total self-esteem score is obtained by summing the 10 responses to yield a range of scores from 10 to 40.

Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS)

The ACS (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) is an 80 item self-report measure assessing coping strategies. The items are rated on a 5-point scale, 1 for “doesn’t apply”, 2 for “used very little”, 3 for “used sometimes”, 4 for “used often” and 5 for “used a great deal”. Previous factor analysis identified 18 scales which represent 18 common coping strategies used by adolescents such as social Support, worry, ignore the problem or physical recreation. These 18 scales can also be identified as three styles of coping: solving the problem style, non-productive coping style and reference to others style.

Academic Achievement

This was measured using percentiles from grades obtained in Year 11.

Teacher Rating Form

This form completed by teachers used a 10-point scale for each student, rating their ability to manage relationships, social standing among peers, effort in academic work and ability to solve life’s problems.

Self Rating Form

This form was completed by each student as a self-report measure assessing the same areas as the Teacher Rating Form on a 10-point scale.

In addition a focus group interview was conducted and case study data were collected.

Procedure

A talk about life coaching was given by the school counsellor to all the Year 12 students and their parents during an orientation to Year 12 night. During the normal interviews for Year 12s by the principal and deputy, students were asked if they wished to participate in life coaching. Of those students interested in receiving in life coaching, 12 were randomly selected. A comparison group of 12 students were matched for age, gender, academic attainment and pastoral care class. A further 12 students who did not wish to participate in life coaching were also matched for age, gender, academic attainment and pastoral care class with the life coaching students. These 36 students were administered the Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and the Adolescent Coping Scale and the Self-rating

Form. All of the five pastoral care teachers completed the Teacher Rating Form for each selected student in their class. A focus group was conducted with the students from the second control group to investigate their reasons for not wanting coaching.

The life coaching consisted of a different number of sessions for each student over a 6 month period according to their different needs and extra-curricular commitments. Most students attended one session per fortnight for the first two terms of the year. The first session usually consisted of establishing rapport and then discussing the definition of coaching by asking the student what they considered coaching to be. A mutually agreed definition was usually that coaching is to enhance performance and support growth throughout this year of transition and that the student and coach would work as equal partners. The analogy of sports coaching was used …to motivate, push and cajole students, to keep up their flagging morale and to keep them on tasks and focused on their goals. The students own goals were then discussed either in relation to career planning and aspirations, sporting goals, study goals, managing stress and achieving a balanced life, money and health concerns. Explaining the process and setting another time finished the first session. In subsequent sessions short and long term goals were transcribed and obstacles to the achievement of these goals discussed, strategies to achieve goals and motivation to do so, monitoring of steps, celebrations of successes and changing strategies for failures, refocusing and reviewing were the main strategies employed. Empowerment and reflection were emphasised. After 4 months, face-to-face counselling was supplemented with email counselling.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale, the Teacher Report Form and the Student Report Form were readministered after 6 months of coaching. In addition, interviews and case-study data were collected from the coaching group at this time. The above measures, as well as the Adolescent Coping Scale and academic achievement will be readministered in another 6 months.

Results

Pre coaching

Comparison between the three groups of students (the coached, those who wanted coaching and those who did not want coaching) found there were no statistical differences on age, mean age = 16.36 years, $F(2,35)=.111$, $p=.895$, academic achievement $F(2,35)=.207$, $p=.814$ or teacher report before the students undertook coaching $F(2,35)=.141$, $p=.869$ (See Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

However, there were significant differences between those who were undertaking life coaching and those who were not in their perceptions of their total coping on the Self Report Form $F(2,35)=7.695$, $p<.05$. There were also differences on coping with relationships $F(2,35)=5.096$, $p<.05$, with post hoc analysis showing that the students who were going to have coaching perceived themselves as less able to cope with relationships than those who did not want coaching. There were differences among the three groups on how much effort they rated themselves as

putting into academic work F (2,35)=4.736, p<.05, with post hoc analysis showing that the students who wanted coaching but were not going to receive it reported they put more effort into academic work. This result was surprising as the coached group and those who wanted to be coached were randomly assigned. There were also differences in the groups about their perceived ability to solve life's problems F (2, 35)=6.102, p<.01, with post hoc analysis showing that both control groups reported they were more able to solve life's problems than the target group. There were no differences on the total Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire between the three groups F (2, 35) =0.83, p=.445. However, there was a difference between the groups on the scale of Not Coping F (2, 35) =3.383, p<.05, with post hoc analysis showing that the control groups differed. Those students who did want coaching also reported lower self-esteem than those who chose not to have coaching F (2, 35) =4.922, p<.05.

A focus group of the 12 students who chose not to participate in coaching revealed that the majority of these students believed that they did not need coaching (as also shown by higher self-esteem scores and more productive coping strategies), that they did not have time to fit in coaching into their busy schedules, and had things pretty much sorted out for themselves.

Mid point results

After 6 months there were no differences, based on paired sample t tests, from the pre-test to the post-test scores on the SDQ total t(35)=-1.098, p=.28, or any of the component scales (see Table 2); the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory t(34)=0.229, p=.82 (See Table 3); the Teacher Scale t(35) =-1.117, p=.271(See Table 4); or the Self-Report Scale t(35)=0.175, p=.862 (See Table 5).

Insert Table 2/3/4/5 about here

Two case studies

"Annette" is 17-years-old. She identified that she wanted to improve her grades to Bs and save enough money for a biology excursion to Heron Island and to the formal. In the second session, she planned to create a timetable for study and wear her prescribed glasses for reading. By the third session "Annette" had already experienced changes. She was handing in her assignments by the due date, which made her feel more satisfied, her results had improved, and she had cut back on time spent at the gym; for exercise, she walked her dog instead. She had also cut back on her hours at her part-time job because her parents, who apparently had been impressed with the changes, had offered to pay for the trip to Heron Island. Having done the homework timetable and study planner, she also recognised the need to cut back on her social life, so she began to identify other goals, relating to her thoughts and feelings. Her new goals were related to management of her anger. She incorporated strategies her brother had identified, and the plan became to practise "Stop. Think. Act Cool." She also continued to work towards her academic goals and had realised that wearing her glasses diminished her headaches.

"Adrian" is also 17-years-old. His goal was to achieve an A in every subject.

He was quite clear that, in the longer term, his goals included obtaining a job “with no financial limitations”. Interestingly, he then also stated that he wanted to be “in tune with himself” and “in touch with his higher place”. He identified his main obstacle as being “inherently lazy”. He decided to change his television viewing habits and become organised, which meant including time in his schedule for drum practice. He also changed his goals as the time passed. His new goals became to achieve fitness by jogging in the morning, and riding his bike after school, then to play the drums before settling in to study and to become more flexible. When he went on to the email system he also emphasised that he wanted to maintain face-to-face, one-to-one contact, because, he said “that builds the relationship, and shows you care a whole lot more”. His most recent emails indicate that he feels confident that he is managing his study time wisely. He has said that he is coping well while striving to do more, and being more passionate about this each day.

Discussion

The initial findings from this pilot study found there were some differences between those students who volunteered to participate in the life coaching sessions and those who did not. The students who volunteered to participate in coaching initially reported a lower total score on the Self-report Form than those who did not volunteer to participate. These students saw themselves as less able to manage relationships, put in less academic effort and were less able to solve life’s problems than those students who were not entering coaching. In addition, they reported using more non-coping strategies and showed lower self-esteem scores. This seemed unusual as these 12 students were randomly chosen from the 71 students who initially wanted to participate in the coaching program. However, it is interesting to note that 68% of all students volunteered to participate in life coaching. This number was unexpectedly high and shows the demand there is for professional life coaches in the school system.

A preliminary evaluation of the quantitative data shows that there were no significant changes on any of the measures, the SDQ, Rosenberg, Teacher or Self-report Form, from the beginning of coaching to the 6-month data collection point. However, there were trends beginning to appear which indicated that the coached students were gaining in confidence and in effort.

While the SDQ showed no statistically significant changes, there was a trend for the non-coached students to report more total problems than 6 months ago, while the coached students reported no change. The Rosenberg Self-esteem scale also showed no significant changes. This could be because the scale is uni-dimensional and global self-esteem measures tend not show large changes over short periods of time as this measure is reasonably stable (Cassidy & Trew, 2001; Kinnunen, Feldt, & Mauno, 2003).

The Teacher Report Form also showed no statistically significant changes from Time 1 to Time 2. There appears to be a halo effect operating with teachers as they scored each student similarly on all aspects of ability. There also appears to be a trend for all teachers to rate all students higher after working with them for 6 months. This could be a result of the good relationships the teachers develop with their

students. Research with teachers has shown that while they are competent in detecting learning problems in students (Shinn, Tindal, & Spira, 1987; Stevens, 1982; Wilton, Cooper, & Glynn, 1987) they are not as accurate in specifying a particular diagnosis (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Gottlieb, Gottlieb, & Trongone, 1991) and often under-identify internalising of problems by students (Gardiner, 1994; Green, Clopton, & Pope, 1996; Pearcy, Clopton, & Pope, 1993). However, at both data collection points, overall, teachers rated all students consistently lower on their abilities to manage relationships, expend academic effort and solve life's problems than the students themselves. Studies have shown that teachers perceive students' problems differently from the students themselves. Fanshawe and Burnett (1999) found this incongruence between responses of high school students and their teachers on evaluating student problems. The teachers regarded the students' problems as more serious than the students did and also had more doubt about the students' ability to cope. In addition, it is interesting to note a trend for teachers to rate the coached group of students as expending more academic effort after 6 months of coaching than either of the control groups.

The Self-report Form, although again not statistically significant from Time 1 to Time 2, showed some interesting trends. Overall, the coached students rated themselves as improving in their ability to manage relationships and academic effort, while the noncoached students in both control groups rated themselves lower in these abilities than at Time 1. Especially interesting was the trend of the coached students to report they were increasing their academic effort compared to the noncoached students who reported they were expending less effort than at the beginning of the year. This is a significant finding because if the trend continues, it will show that life coaching increases motivation and effort at a time when motivation tends to decrease.

An analysis of the qualitative data showed that all students who were in the coaching program expressed satisfaction with coaching. In fact, many students in the first control group who had initially wanted coaching but who were not included in the program because of limitations with resourcing, were still expressing disappointment 6 months later. Therefore, there were clearly benefits gained from the life coaching sessions, such as developing a positive relationship with a caring adult who provided a structure for the young person to explore their goals and increase their motivation and effort to achieve them. These results, together with the quantitative trends, indicate that life coaching may have potential for building resilience and well being in young people.

There are, however, limitations to this study. First, the small sample size means that the results should be treated with a degree of caution. Second, the sample was drawn only from one school and further research is needed with populations from different schools. Third, the results reported are from a midpoint data collection and it is hoped that the trends which are showing after 6 months of coaching will increase to significant differences at the 12 month point of data collection.

In summary, life coaching seems to have a positive effect on Year 12 students, increasing their goal setting abilities and their motivation. It will be interesting to assess their progress at the end of Year 12 and 12 months after they have left school. Future research is indicated to provide more evidence that life coaching can make a positive difference in young people's lives.

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Table 1
Comparison of Groups Pre-coaching

		Coached	Yes control	No Control
Age		16.42	16.33	16.33
Academic Achievement		4.83 (2.41)	5.50 (2.75)	5.00 (2.76)
Total Teacher Report		26.83 (5.12)	27.17 (4.13)	26.08 (5.95)
Total Self Report		30.17(5.88)$_a$	38.17 (5.27)$_b$	36.42 (4.5)$_b$
	Relationships	5.92 (1.73)$_a$	7.50 (1.78)$_b$	8.00 (1.48)$_b$
	Academic effort	5.17 (1.80)$_a$	7.42 (1.78)$_b$	6.17 (1.80)$_a$
	Life's problems	5.83 (2.17)$_a$	8.00 (1.41)$_b$	7.67 (1.16)$_b$
SDQ total problems		9.00 (4.92)	7.83 (3.90)	6.83 (3.41)
Rosenberg's self-esteem scale		19.67 (4.46)$_a$	21.58 (2.39)$_b$	23.92 (2.75)$_c$

Table 2

Means (and standard deviations) on the SDQ for the three groups

	Coached		Yes Control		No Control	
	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)
Emotional	2.92 (2.47)	2.67 (2.19)	2.67 (1.88)	2.33 (2.06)	1.17 (1.12)	1.50 (1.32)
Conduct Problems	1.00 (1.13)	1.17 (1.53)	.83 (1.03)	1.08 (1.0)	1.25 (1.29)	1.50 (1.17)
Hyperactivity	3.25 (2.22)	3.58 (1.51)	3.17 (1.85)	3.58 (1.62)	3.67 (2.10)	3.75 (1.91)
Peer Relationships	1.83 (1.80)	1.58 (1.73)	1.17 (.84)	1.42 (1.17)	.75 (.97)	1.33 (1.37)
Pro-social	8.58 (1.24)	8.67 (1.07)	8.67 (1.61)	8.67 (1.23)	7.42 (1.78)	7.33 (1.67)
Total Problems	9.00 (4.92)	9.00 (4.77)	7.83 (3.90)	8.42 (3.78)	6.83 (3.41)	8.08 (3.55)

Table 3

Means (and standard deviations) of Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for the three groups

	Coached		Yes Control		No Control	
	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)
Rosenberg	19.67 (4.46)	19.58 (4.68)	21.58 (2.39)	22.36 (4.08)	23.92 (2.75)	23.00 (4.57)

Table 4

Means (and standard deviations) on the Teacher Rating Form for the three groups

	Coached		Yes Control		No Control	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Coping with relationships	6.75 (1.42)	6.83 (1.34)	6.83 (1.27)	6.92 (1.17)	6.75 (1.55)	7.00 (1.28)
Coping with peers	6.75 (1.60)	6.92 (1.08)	7.08 (.90)	7.08 (1.38)	7.00 (1.65)	7.08 (1.44)
Academic effort	6.83 (1.53)	7.42 (1.31)	6.50 (1.31)	7.08 (1.31)	6.08 (2.15)	6.08 (1.78)
Ability to solve life's problems	6.50 (1.31)	6.92 (.90)	6.75 (1.29)	6.92 (1.17)	6.25 (1.49)	6.42 (1.51)
Total	26.83 (5.12)	28.08 (3.92)	27.17 (4.24)	28.00 (4.24)	26.08 (5.95)	26.58 (5.02)

Table 5

Means (and standard deviations) on the Student Self-Rating Form for the three groups

	Coached		Yes Control		No Control	
	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)
Coping with relationships	5.92 (1.73)	7.33 (1.44)	7.50 (1.78)	7.33 (1.16)	8.00 (1.48)	8.08 (1.73)
Coping with peers	7.08 (1.31)	7.17 (1.34)	8.00 (1.04)	8.08 (.79)	7.92 (1.38)	7.58 (1.56)
Coping academically	6.17 (1.40)	6.08 (1.17)	7.25 (1.71)	6.67 (1.30)	6.67 (1.50)	6.08 (1.44)
Academic effort	5.17 (1.80)	6.58 (1.78)	7.42 (1.78)	6.33 (2.19)	6.17 (1.80)	5.75 (1.96)
Solving life's problems	5.83 (2.17)	6.83 (1.27)	8.00 (1.41)	7.08 (1.73)	7.67 (1.16)	7.25 (1.55)
Total	30.17 (5.9)	34.0 (5.12)	38.17 (5.27)	35.5 (4.36)	36.42 (4.52)	34.75 (5.08)